



## COVER SHEET

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**Davey, Jeremy and Obst, Patricia and Sheehan, Mary (2001) It goes with the job: Officers insights into the impact of stress and culture within the policing occupation. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 8:pp. 141-149.**

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It Goes With The Job: Officers' Insights Into The Impact Of Stress And Culture On Alcohol Consumption Within The Policing Occupation.

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**Keywords:** stress, workplace culture, work-related alcohol use, policing.

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**Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the Adjunct Professor of CARRS-Q, Dr Vic Siskind, for his valuable comments on this paper, in particular on the statistical analysis.

It Goes With The Job: Officers' Insights Into The Impact Of Stress And Culture On Alcohol Consumption Within The Policing Occupation.

Abstract

The current study surveyed members of an Australian state police service (N = 749), in order to assess what officers felt were the major contributing factors to alcohol consumption within the policing occupation. The study further examined which of these factors were actually predictive of risk of harmful drinking as measured by the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Amundsen & Grant, 1993). Results showed that thirty seven percent of respondents were at risk of harm from excessive alcohol consumption. When asked to rate the importance of factors they felt contributed to their drinking, officers rated social factors such as celebration, and socialising with peers as the most important factors. However factors related to stress emerged as the most predictive of scores on the AUDIT. These findings highlight an often seen contradiction and have important implications for intervention strategies aimed at reducing alcohol consumption within the policing occupation. While officers appear to be drinking to reduce stress, they report drinking for social reasons, thus interventions must take into account the real impact of stress while dealing with social factors to give interventions face validity in the eyes of the officers they aim to help.

### It Goes With The Job: Officers' Insights Into The Impact Of Stress And Culture On Alcohol Consumption Within The Policing Occupation.

In recent years, research seeking to identify factors contributing to drinking has recognised the influence of the workplace. The characteristics and nature of particular occupations may help to explain why some people drink at harmful levels. In the police literature, two factors have been focussed on as having a particular role to play in fostering harmful alcohol use: job characteristics leading to occupational stress, and a culture conducive to alcohol use within the police force.

Policing has typically been classified as a high stress occupation (Crank et al., 1993, Davis, 1993; and Savery et al., 1993), and the link between stress and alcohol use has been recognised (Hurrell et al., 1984; Kroes, 1985). Policing is a stressful occupation not only by nature but also as a result of many other influences associated with the work environment and the organisation (Fenlon, Davey & Mann, 1997).

Death, trauma, violence, grief and danger are part of police work and research has found that dealing with these issues can contribute to stress (Coman & Evans, 1991). However, for many officers, dealing with such events is an infrequent occurrence, particularly if an officer is non-operational.

It has been suggested that for many officers, aspects of the organisation, rather than the nature of policing, can contribute more to feelings of stress because officers have to deal with these stresses on a regular if not daily basis. A study by Brown and Campbell (1990) of almost 1000 officers in the UK found that organisational and management features were more stressful on a long term basis than operational duties. Such organisational stressors include working with insufficient and poor equipment (Coman & Evans, 1988), unnecessary paperwork (Kroes, 1985), competitiveness generated by a strict promotion system (Coman & Evans, 1991), and inadequate supervisory and management practices (Brown & Campbell, 1990).

Violanti, Marshall, and Howe (1985) conducted a survey of 500 police officers in New York State. They found stress and occupational demands to be related to increased alcohol use. Shanahan (1992), Elliott and Shanahan (1994), and Violanti (1993) found alcohol misuse, smoking and taking other drugs are negative coping mechanisms used by police to cope with the strains and pressures of their work.

Of course officers are also likely to cope with stress in different ways. Not all officers who are stressed will drink alcohol excessively. Some may resort to other methods, which could include professional counselling. Further research is needed to explore alternative coping mechanisms used by police officers to manage stress.

To say that stress is the only factor that may contribute to drinking by police officers is to lack full understanding of the ways that the work environment can influence the behaviour of its members. While some officers may drink to cope with stress, many are likely to drink for a variety of other reasons, dependant on circumstances. A factor frequently cited in the literature, as contributing to alcohol use in the police occupation is culture. Culture has been defined as the learned and shared norms of behaviour. Cultures are not universal, they emerge at different workplaces for different reasons and take distinct forms (Fine, Akabas & Bellinger, 1982). Reference has been made by both researchers and police to a culture conducive to a high level of alcohol consumption (Dietrich & Smith, 1986; OHSC, 1992). What may be a more accurate claim however, is that within the police service there are many subcultures each with their own unique drinking patterns. Culture could help to explain why drinking is encouraged and expected within some groups or stations and not others. Culture may be evidenced through such things as peer pressure, and the possible

covering up for people who do have a drinking problem (Fenlon, Davey & Mann, 1997).

Apart from working in a stressful occupation and being part of a work culture that may be conducive to drinking, there are also other factors that may contribute to drinking by police. These include the availability of alcohol both inside and outside the workplace, the absence of a workplace policy on alcohol, lack of workplace education and training on the harms of alcohol, lack of support mechanisms for members to deal with stress, and the requirement of some members to consume alcohol regularly as part of covert policing operations (Fenlon, Davey & Mann, 1997).

Earlier research has identified traditional police drinking occasions. These include celebrations after successful operations, promotions, transfers, debriefings, workshops, and seasonal celebration such as Christmas. It must be noted that police involvement in these type of drinking occasions is not necessarily negative. Many of these celebrations reflect wider community traditions and promote esprit de corps. However policy needs to address the potential negative aspects of such events in the context of a work environment that can be stressful and conducive to alcohol (Fenlon, Davey & Mann, 1997).

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Amundsen & Grant, 1993) is a 10 item questionnaire designed to elicit those at risk of harmful drinking behaviours. It has the advantage over many other drinking indicators of examining respondents risk levels over a range of harms associated with excess alcohol use. It has also been shown to be an excellent tool for screening for those at risk of harmful consumption within a large organisation (Davey, Obst & Sheehan, 1999).

The current study aims to extend previous work examining workplace characteristics of policing which may contribute to harmful alcohol use by examining police officers feelings regarding the impact and reasons for excessive alcohol consumption within the policing occupation. Gathering data on what police feel are major reasons for their drinking, can facilitate the development of intervention strategies targeting both what police see as areas of concern as well as those coming from empirical research within the literature. These areas may well be very different. Thus if interventions include areas which police themselves see as problems, interventions are more likely to be accepted as valid and therefore have the potential to be more influential in reducing harmful alcohol consumption.

#### Method

##### Participants

The sample consisted of police officers recruited from two divisions of an Australian state police service ( $n = 749$ ). The divisions consisted of one metropolitan division ( $n = 393$ ) and one regional division ( $n = 356$ ). Males constituted 86% of the sample ( $n = 644$ ), females 12% of the sample ( $n = 92$ ), 13 respondents did not indicate their gender. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 60 with a median age bracket of 31 to 35 years. The gender ratio in the whole statewide police service was 87% male and 13% female, indicating the representativeness of the sample in terms of gender. As can be seen in Table 1 the sample also reflected the rank strata of the organisation. No other demographic information was available for comparison.

Insert Table 1

##### Instrument

Section 1 of the questionnaire contained questions relating to socio-demographic details. This section asked respondents sex, age, and rank in service.

Section 2 asked questions about alcohol and the workplace. These included questions about where and when alcohol was available in the workplace, the impact of

co-workers drinking on their work performance and the impact of officers own drinking on their work performance. This section also examined aspects of the police culture by asking participants how colleagues who didn't drink alcohol were treated. It also asked participants how much of their off duty time did they spend socialising with police colleagues.

Section 3 asked questions about drinking behaviour. Personal drinking behaviour was measured by the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Amundsen & Grant, 1993) which yields scores from 0 to 40 indicating risk of harmful drinking; scores less than 8 indicate low risk, scores from 8 to 13 indicate hazardous drinking patterns, and scores above 13 indicate harmful consumption.

Section 4 inquired why participants felt they drank alcohol. This section listed 10 items gathered from the literature and previous focus groups with police officers as major reasons for police drinking. Participants were asked to rate the importance of each of these items on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important) as reasons for drinking.

#### Procedure

The development of the draft questionnaire was based on discussions with reference groups, literature reviews and on the AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Amundsen & Grant, 1993). The draft questionnaire was then piloted with 50 officers in the two divisions. Their comments were sought regarding the content of the questionnaire as well as how long it took them to complete.

The final questionnaire was sent to all officers in two divisions of an Australian state police service through the internal police mailing system. One division was a metropolitan division and the other a rural division. A reminder message was put on the payslip. As this was an anonymous survey a follow up questionnaire was sent to all officers three weeks after the first mail out to ensure a maximum response rate. Of the 1354 questionnaires sent out, 749 were returned. This constitutes an overall response rate of 55% percent.

### Results

#### AUDIT Risk Category

Of the 749 officers who completed the questionnaire 63.5% scored below 8 indicating no risk of harmful drinking; 33% scored between 8 and 13 indicating them to be at risk of harmful drinking and 3.5% scored above 13 indicating alcohol dependency.

#### Impact of Drinking on Workplace

Twenty three percent of the sample reported being affected by co-workers drinking in some way during the previous year. Of those, 44% stated the co-worker drank before a shift, 20% during a shift and 36% after a shift.

Only 2% of the sample stated that their own drinking during work sometimes impacted on their performance. However 22% stated that their drinking during work did not impact on their work performance, 68% stated that they did not drink at work and 8% that they didn't drink. Fourteen percent stated that drinking outside work hours had affected their work performance at sometime in the last year.

#### Alcohol Availability

In regards the availability of alcohol in the workplace, 76% of the sample stated that alcohol was available at work on special occasions; 42% of the sample stated that alcohol was regularly available in the staff club, and 14% said that alcohol was available at work for a regular happy hour. Seventy two percent of the sample stated

that light beer was available, and 62%, 32%, and 29% that standard beer, wine and spirits were available in the workplace, respectively.

#### Social Activities with Police

When asked what percentage of social and recreational activities involved police colleagues, 10% of participants stated none, 44% less than 25%, 19% responded 25 to 49%, 17% responded 50 to 74% and 10% stated more than 75%.

#### Treatment of Non-Drinkers by Colleagues

When asked how non drinkers are treated by work colleagues in the police service, 69% stated that they were accepted and treated the same as anyone else and 31% stated that they were viewed negatively, suspiciously or as unsociable.

#### Reasons Police Give for Drinking

Table 2 shows the ratings of importance participants gave to the 10 items indicating reasons for their own drinking.

Insert Table 2

A factor analysis was performed on the 10 items indicating participant's ratings of importance on reasons for their drinking. Two factors with Eigen values above one emerged accounting for 64% of the variance. Table 3 shows the items and loadings for each factor.

Insert Table 3

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed with total AUDIT score as the dependant variable. The demographic variables of sex and age were entered in Step 1 to control for their known influence on alcohol consumption. These variables accounted for a small but significant amount of the variance in total AUDIT scores ( $r^2 = .02$ ,  $F(2, 684) = 6.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Standardised scores on the factors stress and social were entered as step 2, they accounted for a significant increase in the proportion of the variance in total AUDIT scores explained ( $r^2 = .44$ ,  $F_{\text{cha}}(2, 682) = 133.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 4 presents the results of this analysis.

Insert Table 4

#### Discussion

These results indicate that alcohol consumption is a potential problem within the police force. Over a third of the sample showed risk of problem alcohol consumption according to their scores on the AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Amundsen & Grant, 1993). Thus this study provides evidence that alcohol intervention strategies are needed within the police workplace.

#### Police Work Environment

The results of this study give a picture of the police work environment in regards to alcohol consumption. Responses to questions on alcohol availability revealed a work environment where alcohol seems to be available. The link between alcohol availability and alcohol consumption is well established in the literature (e.g. Lehman, Farabee, Holcom & Simpson, 1995; Sheehan, 1994). Three quarters of the sample reported that alcohol is available at work on special occasions and nearly half of the sample reported that alcohol is regularly available in the staff club. This data indicates that alcohol is available either on a regular basis or at least on certain occasions in the majority of stations sampled. Further almost a quarter of the sample reported being affected by a coworker's drinking. The majority of these reported coworkers drinking before or during a shift, suggesting that the officer was under the effects of alcohol during duty.

In regards to respondents' views of non drinkers within the police service, a significant proportion viewed non drinkers negatively, suspiciously or as antisocial. Around a third of the officers reported spending more than half of their recreational time with police colleagues. Taken together this data indicates a work environment where alcohol is available, where non drinkers are seen in a negative light by some officers, and where participants report being affected by coworkers drinking. Added to this is the fact that many officers socialise together during their off duty hours. This data does suggest a culture supportive of alcohol use. Such a work environment could indeed be conducive to high levels of alcohol consumption. The significant proportion of officers showing risk of problem drinking on the AUDIT indicates that police could benefit from interventions aimed at changing the acceptance of alcohol within the work environment thus helping to reduce officers alcohol consumption levels.

#### Factors Police Think Are Important Contributors to Their Alcohol Consumption

When asked to rate the importance of items devised from focus groups and previous literature as reasons for their alcohol consumption, "to celebrate special occasions" and "to send of colleagues" emerged as the most highly rated items, closely followed by "drinking is enjoyable". These items are indicative of a norm of drinking particularly as a means of celebration within the police service. This notion of alcohol being a symbol of celebration is of course not restricted to the police service but reflects a wider community tradition. However this does not exonerate excessive behaviours and policy and intervention should address the potential negative aspects of such events. Of note also is that almost a quarter of the sample rated that "to be part of the team" was an important reason for their drinking. This indicates that many officers perceive a pressure to drink alcohol as a result of just being a member of the police service. It appears these officers feel that belonging signifies drinking and attests again to the influence of culture on the drinking behaviour of some officers.

The next cluster of items rated as important were those associated with stress reduction such as to help relax or to cope with stress. This indicates that many officers may self medicate, using alcohol as a mechanism to relax and cope with stress.

Not surprisingly when the ten individual items were factor analysed, they loaded on to two factors: those items dealing with stress and those dealing with social influence. When these factors were used as predictors of total AUDIT scores, they accounted for nearly half the variance in total AUDIT scores after the influence of demographic variables was removed. While both emerged as significant predictors, stress was the most important factor in predicting risk of harmful alcohol consumption. This is interesting in light of the higher importance police officers gave to social factors, as a reason for their drinking.

This contradiction highlights an important point. Interventions are rightly often based on what research shows as the underlying problems or factors leading to drinking within an organisation. However it is often the case that members of that organisation see the situation in somewhat different terms. Intervention strategies must capture both the underlying factors and those that employees feel are important to have a chance at successfully changing attitudes within the organisation.

Upon identifying the aspects of the police work environment that may contribute to drinking, workplace intervention strategies to reduce alcohol consumption by police officers can be devised. Workplace interventions must aim to eliminate certain problems, reduce the level of existing problems and better manage existing problems to reduce adverse consequences (Blaze Temple, 1992). However it is important when implementing such strategies in an environment such as a police organisation, which



can be closed and defensive, that they appear to have face validity. That is that interventions include areas that police see as important or areas of concern.

It is also important to realise that not all drinking is necessarily harmful. Having a few drinks to wind down or relax at the end of a shift or after a particularly traumatic incident may be an effective way for some officers to de-stress. Harmful drinking is not simply based on the amount, frequency and nature of alcohol consumed, it is also measured by its short and long term effects on many aspects of an individuals life, such as work performance, driving ability, physical and emotional health, and family and social relationships.

Thus the results of this study have important implications for intervention programs. While stress is an important underlying factor in risk of harmful drinking within the police service, officers feel that they are drinking mostly for social reasons. Thus for strategies aimed at reducing alcohol consumption in the police service to be maximally successful, they must target not only stress but also be attuned to the importance of social factors and culture to police officers. Thus police could benefit from interventions promoting new healthier ways of dealing with stress. However any such interventions would need to be promoted in such a way as to be accepted into the police culture, for them to have the required impact. Further research could examine in detail the sub-cultures which exist within the police service. This could then further inform and target intervention strategies.

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Table 1

Breakdown Of Sample By Gender And Rank In Comparison To Police Organisation.

Rank	Gender	Police N	Sample N	Sample % of Organisation
Executive and Commissioned Officers And Others	Male	258	25	10
	Female	9	2	22
Sergeants and Senior Sergeants	Male	1851	233	13
	Female	99	11	11
Constables and Senior Constables	Male	3383	386	12
	Female	688	79	12
Total	Male	5502	644	12
	Female	796	92	12
Missing Data			13	
Total		6298	749	12

Table 2

Ratings of Importance (1= not important to 10 = very important) Police gave to Reasons for Their Drinking

Item	Mean	Median	% Rating above 6
To celebrate special occasion	7.01	7	79%
To send off colleague	5.98	6	61%
Enjoy drinking	4.90	5	46%
To help relax	4.66	5	39%
To cope with stress	3.94	3	28%
To be part of the team	3.74	3	26%
To wind down after shift	3.47	3	23%
To help meet people	3.38	2	20%
To avoid unpleasant emotions	2.87	2	16%
It is expected	2.40	1	11%

Table 3  
Factor Analysis of Reasons Police Give for their Drinking

Factor	Items	Factor Loadings
Factor 1 Stress	To help cope with stress	.89
	To help relax	.82
	To deal with unpleasant emotions	.84
	To wind down at the end of a shift	.53
Factor 2 Social Influence	To celebrate special occasions	.74
	To help meet people	.65
	To be part of the team	.71
	It is expected	.62
	To send off a colleague	.78
	Enjoy social drinking	.58

Table 4  
Regression Analysis of Reasons for Police Drinking on Total AUDIT Scores.

Factors		Beta Weights	Standard Error
Step1	Sex	.001	.530
	Age	.063*	.098
Step2	Stress	.563***	.021
	Social	.139***	.018

Note: \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$